

Contextualizing the Message Through Use of Case Studies

Comprehension may best occur within the context of a story—a case study. Here is an article that shows us the wisdom of their use especially in light of Christ’s own use of them and various lessons to be gleaned as we contextualize the Gospel to the unreached nations.

by Paul J. Fritz

It comes as no surprise to users of case studies that most people would rather see a sermon than hear one any day. Showing someone a picture of real life is always better than telling them what you think happened. Stories have a way of involving all five of our senses in a suspenseful way that makes the audience hunger for more. Stories have a way of helping people learn inductively through associations with things that are familiar, compelling, and easily identifiable. Certain stories or case studies bring a measure of reality that rings with truth. Stories can make the old truths seem as fresh as the new morning air. Conflict and suspense makes a story irresistibly arousing. With the right amount of dramatic twists, a good story can evoke emotions and responses like nothing else.

Balancing a sense of humor, descriptions, interpretations, and analysis can make stories accomplish the four essential purposes of any message:

- 1). Inform—by capturing the audience’s interests and sense of vital needs.
- 2). Persuade—by giving them positive proofs of the benefits of learning the stories’ lessons or convincing them of certain errors to avoid.
- 3). Apply—by suggesting guidelines for implementing the ideas in the story along with the examples of the best ways to solve similar problems.
- 4). Inspire—by stimulating their sense of motivation for thinking, believing, or acting in ways commensurate with the truth.

An African Case Study

Take for example, a pastors con-

textualization and application of biblical truths by means of the following story: A woman in central Nigeria wanted her husband to pay more attention to her needs, but nothing seemed to work. Finally, she became so desperate that she visited a traditional medicine man. She told the herbalist, “I want my husband to cater to my needs and love me as he once did. Now he treats me as one of his animals or possessions. Can you help me make my husband love me?”

The herbalist did not want to admit that he could not solve such a difficult problem. Especially since the woman could wreck his credibility in the community if she told others about the herbalist’s inability to solve her problem. So he thought of a solution which will be nearly impossible to carry out. He turned to the woman and said, “Go and search for a hyena with a new born calf. Then squeeze the milk from the udders of the mother hyena and bring it to me. I will then make a special potion of medicine that will solve all your problems.”

The woman was so desperate for a solution that she went in search of a mother hyena deep into the bush. Finally, she found a nursing hyena and her calf, but she was afraid to approach it. Days rolled into weeks and weeks into months and yet the woman refused to quit until she found a way to get what she wanted. Eventually, someone suggested that she approach the mother hyena with some meat in order to win its confidence. Quickly, she rushed to the market and bought a small amount of meat that she could hold in her hand.

Initially she was afraid to get too close to the hyena so she just threw the meat where the mother hyena could find it, but eventually she drew closer to the mother. After several attempts of bonding with the hyena, the woman moved close enough to touch the hyena and stroked its back comforting it with her soft voice. The next day, the woman gained the mother hyena’s confidence to the point that she could touch every part of the animal’s body. Now the time was ripe for the woman to extract some milk from the mother hyena’s udder. The next day she took plenty of meat to keep the animal contented.

While the animal was enjoying the meat, the woman gently snuck up under the powerful hyena and proceeded to milk her udder until she filled a small bowl of milk. She was so delighted that she almost tripped and spilled the precious milk on her way home that evening. Joyfully she presented the hyena’s milk to the herbalist who said, “I commend you for your valiant efforts and want you to wait for a short time.” As the woman waited the herbalist wondered what he was going to do, now that his back was to the wall. Exasperated he said, “Woman I have seen that this milk is truly from a mother hyena but I have no special powers or medicine that will make your husband love you and shun all other women. But go and show love to your husband just as you have shown special care for the mother hyena. Then your husband will love you exceedingly beyond all that you can even imagine!”

The woman went home and

began to fry special meat for her husband, determined to care for him like never before. Do you know what happened? The husband's attitude changed completely. Soon he began to love his wife in ways that everyone in the community marvelled at. Women throughout the village came to ask the wife, "What is your secret? We will do anything to be loved as you!" The woman began at the point of the husband's felt needs and won his love through initiating love! She no longer waited to be loved, but set love in motion by her own initiative.

Advantages in Using Case Studies

Let's notice how case studies or stories can help us in evaluating the framework of people's thinking. First, they give us enough details of similar problems to the ones we are facing to help us understand possible alternative solutions. Case studies allow us to simulate an actual occurrence of events without endangering our resources, time, or efforts. We are able to look at a situation from hindsight, evaluating if someone's decisions were the absolute best at the time.

Furthermore, we can look at a variety of hypothetical situations and consider a whole range of possible factors that need considerations in light of present realities. Case studies help us ask intelligent questions about how to improve our relationships, endeavors, and decision-making. Through case studies a person can more clearly understand the gap between one's present reality and the ideals of a culture. Once identified, there can be a clearer understanding of how the real can be moved closer to the ideal. At that point a greater sense of reality of other peoples' experiences can be brought to life.

The case study does not have to put the learner into the pressures of the warfare until one is completely prepared to go to battle. In a case study, the person is involved with reading, thinking, analyzing, applying, evaluating,

synthesizing solutions, and discussing with others the contextual factors surrounding the case. When one reacts to a case study they are putting themselves in the shoes of another and stretching their imaginations. Proverbs 23:7 says, "As a man thinks within himself, so he is!"

Collecting Data

Case studies or storytelling also allow for collecting valuable insights from various people's experiences. Someone has rightly said, "If we do not learn the lessons from history we are bound to repeat them!" Experiences have a way of sharpening our set of discerning perspectives. Once a person is cheated, they are less apt to be cheated in the same way twice. Some of the best lessons I have learned in life come from my own mistakes. Thankfully, I am not limited in my learning by my own experiences or I would have to make a great deal of blunders. Case studies have a way of gathering the best from others' experiences to garner principles that guide major decisions. Not only does this facilitate open mindedness, but it enhances one's appreciations for what others have gone through. Case studies allow one to view a difficulty from dozens of different perspectives without actually having to experience a situation first hand.

Christ's Use of Case Studies

1. *He allowed people to put themselves in many difficult identities, roles, and responsibilities.* This allowed the people to appreciate the Canaanite woman's plight recorded for us in Matt. 15:21-30. Many could vicariously imagine how the woman must have felt in such a desperate condition. Jesus highlighted the fact that the woman's faith provided liberation from the evil spirits. Likewise, the faith of a parent, teacher, or leader can make a dramatic effect in freeing people from all types of bondage. The Lord emphasized that

regardless of a person's background they are not limited from experiencing the best from Him. He taught the disciples an important lesson in overcoming their discriminatory tendencies by showing them that even a Gentile woman (a person to be avoided at all costs, or so they thought) and her daughter were important to the Lord.

2. *Jesus showed that case studies do not always have easy solutions, but involve many complex factors.* Even Jesus hesitated at first to address the woman's need. He realized the difficulties of cross-cultural ministries. He was fully aware that His primary focus was to the Jews and not to the Gentiles. Yet, He trained His disciples in integratively solving problems with wisdom, knowledge, and faith.

3. *Jesus used case studies as opportunities for the disciples to learn how to link theory and practice.* One of the most difficult aspects of teaching in a theological seminary in Africa is nurturing the student's ability to bridge theoretical truths with their real problems and ministries. Case studies have a way of bringing the theoretical in line with the practical. I presented a case study about the dynamics of "king-making" in Africa for a cultural anthropology final exam. The students worked for four hours drawing links between the practical case study (borrowed from Paul Hiebert's *Case Study* book) to principles learned in the class. They unanimously shared: "This was the most meaningful exam we have ever taken in our life!"

4. *Jesus used case studies to broaden the horizons of His disciples.* Most of the disciples rarely had the opportunity to move much beyond their home region. They lacked a greater global perspective that many of us have today thanks to satellite television, newspapers, and radios. A macro perspectives lifts our eyes beyond the problems of one's immediate circumstances.

5. *Jesus used case studies to help alleviate people's fear of the unknown.* When the other disciples watched Peter walk on the water to meet the Lord, they would have been greatly inspired by the power of their Master over all forces in nature. Among non-Western thinkers, many people live in a constant state of paralysis by their fears. These fears usually center around our alarm about death, ancestral spirits, sickness, suffering, oppression, hunger, pain, disasters, or attack from numerous human and supernatural enemies.

Jesus urged people not to fear, for He assured them of His protecting presence.

Paul reinforced this when He said, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he has put everything under his feet." (I Cor. 15:26,27)

6. *Jesus used case studies to help people retain, transfer, use and deepen their faith in God.* No doubt, the case studies exhibited through Christ and His parables have been told millions of times throughout history. Transfer is an ability to take information learned in one situation and convey it to another. Many people have little trouble learning new information, but most struggle with the ability to transfer that information into practice. These powerful stories have a way of helping people illustrate, apply, instruct, persuade, and inspire others unlike propositional truths. This inductive teaching emphasis was a common trait of Christ's. When people hear about Jesus stilling the winds, and the waves with three simple words, "Hush, be still!" They are comforted by the fact that God's power is greater than any problem, person, or circumstance.

7. *Jesus used case studies to enhance the disciples ability to analyze motives*

and solve problems. Analysis is the detailed examination of a person, substance, or structure to ascertain its component parts. When one has the ability to analyze and discern, then one can see beneath the surface to the root causes. Jesus was a Master at analysis. He knew what the thoughts and motives of men's hearts were. He used case studies to help His disciples gain skill in analysis as to ideas, events, and people. When

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the disciples came back from their first evangelism experience in Luke 10, they said, "Even the demons are subject to us in your name!" Jesus said, "Do not rejoice in that, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven!" He wanted them to look for the deeper reasons behind the events. Case studies give us the benefit of going beyond description to interpretation, analysis, and evaluations—a much needed element in contextualizing theology among non-Western thinkers.

8. *Jesus used case studies to help people correlate truths and events at their own level.* It is easy to see little problems as bigger than they are unless we have the benefit of comparison and contrast. Correlations bring into mutual relationships complimentary events or ideas for the purpose of enhancement. When we are well connected to one another and to the body of Christ we are able to get a bigger picture of greater plans of God than simply getting myopic about our own selfish concerns. Without correlation, we tend to distort truths out of proportion. Jesus knew that case studies provided a continual supply of correlations that help provide

balance of perspectives. Often Jesus would correlate the realities of the disciples lives by correlating God's care for nature. Once Jesus said, "Consider the lilies of the field. They do not sow or toil and yet even Solomon in all his array was never clothed as beautifully as one of these! (Matt. 6:30). Contextual theologians do not need to be afraid of using analogies in their ministries. It is perhaps the single most effective means of teaching and learning styles found in traditional African education. For instance, many Africans see correlations between their cultural views of sin, sickness, and suffer-

ing and the biblical views of sin, spiritual sickness, and spiritual judgment with those of the traditional African view. One Tangale student writes the following descriptions about their tribal views that can be easily linked to the biblical basis for the sin, sickness, and judgment:

—*Tangales believe that SIN is sassalap*—This means living contrary to the accepted norms of the culture. Any offense against the will of society, the gods, or the ancestral spirits will result in punishment. The Bible makes it clear that sin is living contrary to the laws and nature of God. Any offense against God and His standards will result in spiritual death. In the light of this tremendous need the majority of Tangales have embraced Christ as their Savior.

—*Tangales believe that SICKNESS is pada*. This means the abnormal condition of the body. It could also mean being afflicted by the gods. Sometimes the Bible links sickness as a consequence of sin, ignorance, or wrong behavior. When the early missionaries showed how the Lord provided healing both through miraculous and through

the use of medicines, the Tangales hearts were touched.

9. *Jesus used case studies to allow the disciples to test out ideals with minimum risk.* Many of us hesitate to try out new ideals unless we have seen others experiment with them first. When Peter saw Jesus walking on the water, he was willing to venture out into the deep. No doubt, this innovation gave the other disciples more confidence in the Savior. They wanted others to test the solutions and promises offered by the Master before they would try them out. Case studies offer face saving examples of others who have undertaken a new adventure. When the venturing is accomplished we will have encouraged many more to offer salvation to the lost, edify the believers, and disciple the future leaders of the church. Without the benefits of experimentation by faith we will be stuck in the mire of our own fears of change.

For example, one student shared that in his village of Nyanya in Nigeria, the Lord used a miracle to demonstrate His ideals through one courageous man. It seems that one day a man crossing a road was struck by a car which shattered his right leg. Most of the villagers immediately assumed that the man must have been associating with the occultic secret societies. Despite the persuasion from the few believers in the village, the council of elders declared that the man's accident was a signal of disapproval from the ancestral spirits. Throughout Africa, there are many who assume that nothing occurs without a spiritual cause. However, the Christians decided to use this as an opportunity to witness God's grace through their prayers and actions.

When everyone in the village disassociated themselves from the man, the Christians visited the fellow. Some even took food to him in his time of need. Several men even humbled themselves to bathe the man and assist in helping him put his clothes on in the morning.

Some of the youth got busy clearing his farm at the height of the rainy season.

All of these actions were viewed mysteriously and with wonderment by the non-Christians. Many of them assumed that the Christians must also belong to the secret societies if they are bothering to assist this man. Eventually, their puzzling manner turned into abuse of the Christians. The majority of the villagers felt that the Christians were impeding the ancestral spirits from exacting their discipline on the man. But the believers persevered with the assurance from Christ's promise, "Love your enemies and do good to those who spitefully use you and your reward in heaven will be great." (Luke 6:38)

When the man recovered completely from his accident, the community marveled at the change in his attitudes. He was a transformed man on the outside and the inside. People who were not related to this man, helped restore him without charge or duplicity of motives. Love lifted the man and the community to new heights. Soon the entire community, especially the council of elders sought out the Christians for advice. They asked, "How can we find security, healing, and deliverance from the evil forces like this man experienced?" The gospel penetrated through the area because of this evidence of the grace of God and the love of a handful of believers. This story and others like it, encourage and disciple believers to trust and obey the Lord and see His salvation come, not only individually, but as in this case, corporately.

10. *Jesus used case studies to successfully encourage problem solving through faith and obedience.* Jesus asked Peter (John 6:66-71), if he also wanted to defect, saying, "Surely, you too do not want to go away?" But Peter responded with the precedent setting statement that would stem the tide of defection, deterioration, and defeat when he said, "Lord, to whom shall we

go? You have the words of eternal life and we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God." Peter paved the way for men to apply determined commitment to Christ above all others when presented with problem of abandonment.

One seminary student shared with me that in his region there are procedures for discovering the cause of people's sicknesses. In this particular part of Nigeria, a sick man, who happened to be his grandfather, was perceived to have offended one of the gods or the ancestral spirits. To discover which spirit has been grievously offended, the grandfather was taken to the Juju house with sacrifices to appease the spirits. The traditional priest then spoke to the ancestral spirits on behalf of the grandfather. Occasionally, the priest would say, "He has offended the great grandfather spirit. When the messenger returned with the findings, the family were required to prepare sacrifices of wine, food, and chickens to appease the spirits.

The student shared the story of John 9:11 with his family which taught that once there was a man born blind. The people asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" Jesus replied, "It was neither that this man sinned or his parents, but it was so that the works of God could be displayed in him." Then Jesus healed the blind man who gave a powerful testimony of Jesus before the religious leaders.

The seminary student showed that the way Jesus solved the problems of the blind men and the resistant Pharisees was the way the Tangales should solve their problems. Through faith, the Tangales could be made whole, and without faith they too would remain blind, as the Pharisees. Furthermore, Jesus emphasized that this had occurred in order that God's works, power and glory could be displayed. Man's human comforts are secondary to the greater purposes of God.

11. *Jesus used case studies to explain the patterns, trends, and tendencies of people.* A pattern shows a progressive similarity between experiences, ideas, or people's behavior. Jesus compared His own life to that of Jonah's and to the Temple when He said, "As the temple is destroyed, so will the Son of Man be killed and resurrected from the dead. He also illumined this pattern: "As the Father has sent me so send I you."

Case studies allow contextualizers to learn a great deal through the models of others, both for good and bad. Extrapolations (estimates from known values to unknown results) become possible through analysis of trends in ways that we can predict the response to various kinds of ministry approaches. Without contextualized understandings of cultural patterns, communicators may find themselves going against the heavy flow of cultural traffic.

12. *Jesus used case studies to show cause and effect relationships.*

Some people have a hard time intellectually, socially, or spiritually connecting reasons and results. Throughout the Old Testament people who lived in fear were deprived of many blessings, encountering paralyzing defeats. In Num. 13:31-Num. 14:1-18, the Israelites experienced the problems of cause and effect when they failed to walk by faith and not sight.

Christians, by their spiritual natures, are built to live by faith and not by fear. Contextualizers will learn to use case studies that connect the principles of cause and effect. Failure to make connections between cause and effect or to presumptuously link wrong causes to certain outcomes will end in confusion as in the following study:

A dynamic missionary from the Evangelical Missionary Society of E.C.W.A suddenly fell sick from a serious stroke. Quickly, one of his sisters, who was a renowned traditional doctor came to visit him on his sick bed. She

looked at him and said, "Look, you are suffering because you have forgotten our traditions. You have even refused our medicine, but I have brought some to give you one last chance." She slowly removed a small bottle of a liquid concoction and two small amounts of a powdery substance from her clothes. "The reason why you have fallen sick is

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this: When you were recently visiting some missionaries your vehicle broke down on the way and you were forced to sleep in the bush. During that time, the evil spirits of the forest came and inflicted a serious sickness on you to show their displeasure. To our people, sickness can come as a result of an enemy invoking the power of spirits to bring sickness on one seen to be an invader of their territory. Without this medicine that I brought to you, the power of the curses placed against you cannot be dispelled!"

The missionary shared the story of Job with his sister. He explained that God allowed the devil to test his faithfulness. However, when he was tried he came forth as gold and God multiplied his prosperity greater than ever before. Even though his sister was not

convinced, the missionary distinguished between evil causes and heaven sent ones. He showed that a believer has the following hope and ability to call on God to help him with his problems, regardless of the context.

13. *Jesus used case studies to help people think innovatively, adaptively, and practically.* Once the apostle John

observed someone casting out demons in His name and he said, "We forbade him, because he does not follow along with us." (Luke 9:49) But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him; for whoever is not against you is for you." Jesus recognized the fact that unity in the Spirit does not necessarily require unanimity of methods. Case studies allow us to see that God uses a variety of approaches to accomplish His kingdom purposes. Without an innovative, adaptive, and practical mind set toward a contextualization of theology, we will be stuck in the molds of others and never be able to properly contextualize the Gospel to others.

Typically, this has occurred throughout African theological educational institutions. Well meaning missionaries translated their Bible school and seminary notes and gave them to their African students, faithfully transmitting them. Without their contextualization, we may fall into the same trap of the disciples condemning—those who do not teach as we do. Narrowmindedness in communication content, delivery, and organization continues to be some of the greatest stumbling blocks for contextualization throughout the world.

14. *Jesus used case studies to plant seed thoughts that would grow into great enterprises.* Jesus knew the power of faith in great ideals to transform people and countries. One day a man came up to our Lord saying, "I will follow you, Sir, but first allow me to say goodbye to those at my home." Jesus told him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back, is fit for the king-

dom of God.” (Luke 9:61,62) Many people in Africa enjoy basking in the glories of their histories. No man, Jesus said, is able to plow a straight furrow if he is looking back. A contextual theologian will be able to help the people focus on where they are going in planting seeds for eternity. Case studies help men see the benefits of forward thinking rather than wishing for the good old days to return. Christ wants us to march forward to the building of His kingdom in the hearts of men. No one ever harvested a crop without someone planting the seeds by faith. Lots of great churches, disciples, and ministries are not developing today because of the failure of contextual seed sowing in days gone by. Proverbs 24:3 in the Living Bible says:

Any enterprise is built by wise planning, becomes strong through common sense and profits wonderfully by keeping abreast of the facts.

15. Jesus used case studies to see how the little pieces of the puzzle contribute to the creation of the big picture. Synthesis is the ability to combine elements to form a whole. Today’s computer architects are able to synthesize new hardware and software by synthesizing ideas of others to make equipment that has transformed communications. It is possible to send an entire theological library to Africa through telephoned linked computer modems in minutes with the proper equipment. Someone had to have the vision of putting together the parts of the puzzle to see a bigger picture than others had never imagined before. Jesus gave us the Lord’s prayer from Luke 11:1-4 through synthesizing the essential elements of praise, confession, thanksgiving, reconciliations, consecration, commitments, dedication, and supplications into an easy prayer to remember. His prayer has become a model for all other prayers. He capsulized the essence of prayer in

ten sentences. His prayer covers all the needs of life. It deals with the past sins, the present concerns of life, and the future trials that prepares us for victory through His power. Contextualizers will learn to master synthesis of African theologies for sickness, suffering, and healing etc. through the wise use of case studies. Caution must be used in allowing one’s contemporary case studies to take precedence over the truths of Scripture.

In Conclusion

One student recently shared the powerful need some of his people have for finding a source of reconciliation. To the Gus people of Plateau State, sacrifices are needed to restore harmony between two estranged parties. The *abisku anu* refers to a sacrifice that is based on one’s sayings or pronouncements by a man of authority. He gave a specific example of a father who recently made a declaration that his daughter will not marry any man from a certain tribe. Within months of his pronouncement, his first daughter suspiciously fell in love with a handsome young man from that particular tribe. Because the father loved his daughter so much he decided to offer a sacrifice to the spirits in order to reconcile himself to them and to allow his tribe to be reconciled to the tribe of the young man. Without the sacrifice, everyone in the village believed that the girl could not have a happy or successful marriage. Secretly, the father feared continual harassment from the family spirits for breaking his oath!

A contextualizer will be able to describe Jesus as the Great Reconciler of all men, tribes, and families. He came to provide a means of ending the enmity between nations, genders, and ethnic groups. He can show how Christ used

examples to break down the wall of hatred between the Jews and Gentiles—beliefs that regarded separation as synonymous with holiness.

Additional Resources

1. Look for appropriate stories in newspapers, magazines, or popular literature.
2. Read the advice columns in newspapers to get an idea of the issues and approaches people are currently concerning everyday problems.
3. Ask students or church members to anonymously record some of the events they are currently struggling with. Ask them to prescribe some suggested line of action.
4. Ask people for similar experiences they have faced related to the issues at hand. Some people will take from their history which should be compared and contrasted with the current situations.
5. Write down things people say especially about their observations and experiences.
6. Read widely current fictional stories to enhance your resource bank of case studies. Recognize that truthful case studies are better, but fictional ones have special significance in certain occasions.
7. Search the New and Old Testaments for case studies that can shed light on your present experiences. Be careful that you are able to place the biblical case studies in their proper context and that you are using proper hermeneutics to interpret their primary meanings.

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